BENEATH THE SILENCE

The Names a Regime Tried to Erase

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An Excerpt: Chapters 1 & 2

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A Note on This Excerpt

Beneath the Silence braids two family histories across three generations of communist Albania. The Dakoli family and the Myshketa family are followed in alternating chapters, each marked at its opening with the family name and the year. Chapter 1 belongs to Elida, the author, in 1984. Chapter 2 moves back to 1943 and the Myshketa family, whose story runs parallel through the decades. By the time the two families converge, the reader understands that what was done to one was done to both, and that the silence the title names was not absence, but survival.

Chapter 1

My Prelude

Elida

Durrës, 1984

My shoes were too small.

I had known this for months, but there were no new shoes to be had. So, I curled my toes inward and walked on the edges of my feet, trying to make room where there was none. The leather bit into my heel with every step. By the time we reached the music school, a blister had already formed, hot and wet under my skin.

I didn't tell Mami. Pain was not something we discussed in our family. You felt it, you carried it, you kept walking.

The hallway stretched before us like a throat. Gray walls. Gray floor. Gray light filtering through a barred window high above. Dust floated in the narrow beams, suspended, going nowhere. The doors we passed were heavy and old, their glass panes fogged with age, each one sealed with iron locks the color of dried blood. Behind them, I could hear piano scales. Muffled. Distant. The sound of children who had already been chosen.

I gripped Mami's hand tighter.

Her fingers were warm, her grip steady, but I could feel her pulse against my palm. Fast. Constant. A drumbeat of fear she would never admit to. In our world, mothers didn't show fear. They showed strength, even when there was none left. Especially then.

I was six years old. This was my audition. My one chance to become what I had always wanted to be.

We had walked twenty minutes from our apartment, but it felt like crossing into enemy territory. The Mujo Ulqinaku School of Music was a building designed to intimidate. Plain concrete. Small windows. Walls thick enough to swallow screams. Nothing in Communist Albania was built for beauty. Buildings were built for function. For control. For the quiet reminder that you were small and the state was vast, and your dreams existed only with permission.

If I passed today, I would be allowed to study piano.

If I failed, that door would close. Not just for me. For my family. For the Dakoli name that already carried too much weight, too much suspicion, too much history the Party wanted erased.

My great-uncle Cia had seen it first. When I was barely old enough to walk, he would watch me tap my fingers against tables, against walls, against anything that might make sound.

"Oh, Jaja!" he would say to my grandmother, his voice rising with delight. "This one will be a pianist. Like my Shpresa. I can already see it."

Shpresa. His daughter. The legend of our family. Director of the piano department at this very school. When people in Durrës spoke her name, they spoke it softly, reverently, the way they might speak of a saint.

To me, she was something more. She was proof that a person from our world could become something. Could rise. Could play.

I don't remember choosing to want the piano. The wanting was simply there, like hunger, like breath. Maybe Uncle Cia planted it. Maybe it grew from watching Jaja's face whenever she mentioned Shpresa. Or maybe it came from the piano itself. The glimpses I caught through half-open doors. The gleaming black surface. The white and black keys lined up like teeth. The sound that poured out when someone touched them. A sound that seemed to come from somewhere else entirely. Somewhere clean. Somewhere free.

In Durrës, pianos were rare. Only the school had them. Only the chosen could play. The rest of us pressed our ears against locked doors and imagined.

For months, Mami and I had come to this hallway to prepare. We couldn't afford lessons. We couldn't touch the instruments. But we could listen. We stood against the wall for hours, catching the notes that drifted through the cracks. Scales. Arpeggios. Études that older students practiced until the melodies wore grooves into my memory.

I learned to repeat anything I heard. My voice became my only instrument.

Some of the older students took pity on me. They would tap rhythms on the wall and watch me echo them. Hum intervals and wait for me to sing them back. One girl, whose name I never learned, let me touch a piano key once when no teacher was watching. Just one key. Middle C. The sound it made traveled up my finger, through my arm, and settled in my chest like a small bird taking roost.

I never forgot that feeling.

I wanted to feel it again. I wanted to feel it forever.

Now, here I was. Standing at the end of the corridor. Waiting for the door that would either open my life or close it.

The door opened.

She stepped out.

Teacher Shpresa.

Even in this dim hallway, she seemed to gather light. Her auburn curls refused to be tamed, springing around her face like flames frozen mid-flicker. Her blue eyes held a confidence that filled the space around her. She was small. Smaller than Mami. But when she moved, you watched. When she spoke, you listened. She carried herself like someone who had never been told no. Or if she had, she hadn't accepted it.

"Hello, Elida." Her voice was kind but measured. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, Teacher Shpresa." The words tumbled out too fast, too eager. "I practiced. I sang every day. I know a long poem. I can recite the whole thing if you want."

Something flickered in her eyes. Pride, maybe. Or worry. I couldn't tell.

"That's good to hear." She turned to Mami. "Lili, you'll need to wait here. Parents aren't permitted inside during auditions."

Mami knelt beside me. Her face was close to mine, her breath warm, her eyes holding mine like hands. She smelled of soap and lavender and the particular scent of our kitchen. Home. Safety. Everything I was about to leave behind.

"I wish you much success, *zemra ime*." ("My heart.") She kissed my forehead. Her lips were dry and soft. "Remember. You are a Dakoli. You carry your grandfather's strength. Your grandmother's grace. You are not alone in that room. We are all with you."

She stood. Her hand released mine.

The absence was immediate. A cold space where warmth had been.

Shpresa took my hand. Her grip was firm, her palm cool. Professional. Distant. She led me down the hallway, and I followed on legs that felt like they belonged to someone else.

The audition room was smaller than I had imagined. One piano against the far wall. Black and gleaming, its surface so polished I could see my own reflection in it. A warped, small version of myself. A girl in a red dress who looked terrified.

Three judges sat behind a long table. Two men and one woman. Their faces were the color of concrete, their expressions just as hard. Papers spread before them. Pens in hand. They didn't look up when I entered. They didn't smile. They didn't acknowledge that a six-year-old child had just walked into the room with her whole future balanced on the next few minutes.

Shpresa released my hand and walked to the piano. She sat with her back perfectly straight, her fingers hovering over the keys, and she didn't look at me. Not once.

I stood alone in the center of the room.

The man in the middle spoke without raising his eyes from his notebook. "State your name and age."

"I am Elida Dakoli." My voice came out smaller than I wanted. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I am six years old."

The pen scratched against paper. "We will begin with ear training."

Shpresa played two notes. I closed my eyes and sang them back. She played three more. I echoed them. A chord. I separated the tones in my head and sang each one.

This part I knew. This part I had practiced in the hallway, against the wall, while Mami watched and nodded and whispered, "Good. Again. Good."

"Sing the middle pitch," the judge instructed.

Shpresa struck three keys at once. The notes blurred together in the air, tangling like threads. I listened. I breathed. I found the one hiding between the others and let it rise from my throat.

I looked at Shpresa, desperate for some sign that I was right.

Her face was stone.

"Thank you, Comrade Shpresa." The judge's voice was flat. No praise. No encouragement. Just procedure.

Shpresa stepped away from the piano and took her place behind the table with the others. Now all four of them faced me. Eight eyes. No warmth in any of them.

"Recite a poem," the judge said. "For our Party and our Leader."

My stomach clenched.

I knew what I had to say. Everyone knew. They taught us these poems in school, drilled them into us at assemblies, made us recite them until the words lost meaning and became just sounds. Empty sounds. Sounds that praised a man I had never met, a leader whose portrait hung in every classroom, whose name we were taught to love before we were taught to read.

I thought of the other stories. The ones Jaja whispered at night, when the windows were closed and the neighbors couldn't hear. Stories of ancient Albania. Of warriors and mountains and a time before the Party. Stories that were forbidden. Stories that were real.

But I couldn't tell those stories here.

I drew a breath and began:

"Xhaxhi Enver, Xhaxhi Enver, E ke gojën me sheqer, Plot me sheqer e me hurma, Lum Partia që të ka!"

Uncle Enver, Uncle Enver,
Your mouth is full of sugar,
Full of sugar and persimmons,
Blessed is the Party that has you.

The judge raised his hand.

I stopped. The next line died in my throat like a small animal caught in a trap.

The judges bent over their papers. Their pens moved in unison. Scratching. Scratching. The sound filled the room, louder than my heartbeat, louder than the blood pounding in my ears.

What were they writing? What had I done wrong? Had my voice trembled? Had I mispronounced a word? Had they seen something in my face when I said "Uncle Enver"? Some flicker of doubt, some hint that I didn't believe the words I was saying?

In Albania, doubt was dangerous. Doubt was a crime. Even in a six-year-old's eyes.

"Now," the judge said, looking up, "I will clap a rhythm. You will repeat it."

He clapped. I clapped. He clapped a longer pattern. I followed. Faster now. More complex. Syncopation. Pauses. My palms stung from the impact, but I didn't stop. I matched him beat for beat, my hands moving before my mind could catch up.

When he finished, he made no comment. Just wrote something down.

"Finally, you will sing a song."

This was my territory. This was where I could fly.

I chose "Një Dhuratë për Ditëlindje." A Present for My Birthday. A song about a globe in a classroom, spinning with all the countries of the world painted on its surface. But we only sang about one country. Albania. Always Albania. Only Albania.

I sang with everything I had. My voice filled the room, pushing against the walls, climbing toward the ceiling. I forgot the judges. Forgot my aching feet. Forgot the blister burning on my heel. I was standing on the shore of the Adriatic, the wind in my hair, the sea whispering secrets about the world beyond. Italy. Greece. Places I would never see. Children on the other side of the water, singing their own songs. Did they feel as proud as we were taught to feel? Did they feel as small?

The last note left my lips and dissolved into silence.

I stood perfectly still.

The judges didn't move.

No applause. No nods. No smiles.

Just the scratch of pens. The rustle of papers. The silence that pressed against my chest like a hand.

Shpresa rose and walked toward me. Her hand closed around mine. Cool. Light. Impersonal.

She guided me toward the door.

I turned back, desperate for something. A glance. A flicker. Any sign that I had done enough.

The judges were already looking at their papers.

Even Shpresa. Even her.

The door closed behind me with a click that sounded like a lock turning.

Mami was on her feet before I reached her. Her eyes searched my face, reading it like a page in a book she was afraid to finish.

"How did it go?"

"I don't know." My voice cracked. "They didn't say anything."

She pulled me into her arms. I pressed my face against her chest and breathed in the smell of home.

"You did your best," she said. "That's all anyone can do."

But it didn't feel like enough. Not in Albania. Not for a Dakoli. Not when so much depended on strangers who wouldn't even look at me.

We walked home through the late afternoon light. The shadows had lengthened while I was inside, stretching across the pavement like dark fingers reaching for our feet. The air smelled of salt from the sea and smoke from somewhere distant.

I was still wearing the red dress. Aunt Dhurata's dress. The dress that had taken months to make, scrap by scrap, stitch by stitch. The dress that was supposed to make me look worthy.

It felt like a costume now. Like a lie I had told with fabric.

My shoes bit into my heel with every step. The blister had broken. I could feel the wetness against my sock. But I didn't say anything. I just walked.

Days passed.

Then a week.

No letter came. No list was posted. In Albania, you didn't get answers. You got silence. And in that silence, you learned to live with not knowing.

I hummed the audition song to myself. In bed. In the kitchen. Walking to school. I replayed every moment, searching for the mistake that must have been there. The wrong note. The rushed rhythm. The look in my eyes when I said, "Uncle Enver."

I thought about Shpresa. Her face when she led me out. Blank. Unreadable. Not even a cousin's warmth. Just the mask everyone wore when they didn't want to be seen feeling anything at all.

Then, one afternoon, she came to our door.

She sat at our kitchen table and talked about small things. The weather. A concert she was preparing for. Her father's health. Mami offered tea. Shpresa accepted. They spoke like two women who had all the time in the world.

I sat in my chair and waited. My fingernails dug into my palms.

Finally, Shpresa turned to me.

"Elida, you did very well at your audition."

My heart lifted. The words I had been waiting for. The words I had dreamed.

You'll study piano.

"The Committee has placed you in the violin program," she said. "You'll begin this fall."

The words landed like a blow to the chest.

"Violin?"

"The piano openings were filled." Her voice was calm. Practiced. "The Committee believes you're well-suited for violin."

I stared at her. I couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. The room had gone strange and distant, like I was watching it through water.

Mami's hand settled on my shoulder. "That's wonderful news. You'll be a musician."

I nodded. My lips moved into something that was supposed to be a smile.

That night, we ate dinner in silence. Beans with olive oil. Bread still warm from the bakery. The last of the salted meat Mami had been saving.

No one said piano. No one said violin. No one said anything at all.

After dinner, I helped clear the dishes. I washed each plate slowly, feeling the warm water run over my hands. Babi read the newspaper by the window. Jaja sat in her corner, hands folded, watching me with eyes that held something I couldn't name.

I went to bed early.

The room was dark. A thin line of light glowed under the door. I could hear my parents murmuring in the kitchen. Their voices rose and fell like waves, the words impossible to make out.

I turned on my side and faced the wall.

The plaster was cracked. A long line that started near the ceiling and traveled downward, branching into smaller lines like a river splitting into streams. I traced it with my eyes. Followed it until it disappeared into shadow.

My heel throbbed where the blister had broken. The sheets scraped against the raw skin. I didn't move. I let it hurt.

In the corner of the room, my red dress hung on a hook. Aunt Dhurata's dress. The dress I had worn to prove I was worthy. The dress that hadn't been enough.

The color looked different in the dark. Not red. Not the color of strength or flags or the Party.

Just dark. Just another shadow among shadows.

I closed my eyes.

Somewhere in this city, behind a locked door in a gray building, a piano sat in an empty room. Its keys were cool and smooth, waiting for fingers that would never be mine.

I saw it clearly. The black surface gleaming under a single light. The bench pushed back. The silence around it thick as dust.

A child would sit there tomorrow. A child who had been chosen. A child who wasn't me.

I curled my fingers against my palm, feeling the places where my nails had left marks during the audition. Small crescents in the flesh. The shape of wanting.

In the kitchen, Mami laughed at something Babi said. The sound traveled through the wall, muffled and far away, like it was coming from another country.

I lay still in the dark and listened to my own breathing.

My heel burned.

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Mami had said it at the audition door, her lips dry against my forehead: *You carry your grandfather's strength. Your grandmother's grace.*

I didn't know what she meant. I only knew that our house held things it would not say out loud.

Chapter 2

Blood on the Pavement

Myshketa

Durrës, October 1943

> *My grandmother Gia told me this story in pieces over many years. Some details came from Nona Aishe, who spoke of Hysen Myshketa the way you speak of weather that has already passed, with precision but no expectation of changing it. Other details came from notes and written accounts that family members kept through the decades: small records preserved at great risk. Where I could not know exactly what was said, I imagined what must have been said, because the silence around these events was its own kind of telling.*

The figs arrived before the letter.

Neighborhood children had left them on the doorstep. A bowl of purple-black fruit still warm from the sun. They stole from the Myshketa orchards all summer and paid in petals and found things. A smooth stone. A feather. Once, a button from a German soldier's coat. Aishe never chased them off.

"Look what our petty thieves left for us today," she said, setting the bowl on the table. "Little bandits. I should charge them rent."

The dining room smelled of roasted fish and garlic, of pilaf steaming in its dish, of garden salad dressed with oil from their own trees. Sunlight fell through the windows in long rectangles, catching the dust that rose when anyone moved. The tablecloth was white linen, pressed that morning, already spotted with olive oil near Isa's plate.

Hysen sat at the head of the table. He was sixty-five years old. His scalp was nearly bare, the remaining strands of silver combed back. His face was clean-shaven, the jaw sharp, the eyes holding a clarity that made people speak carefully around him. Everything about him was precise. The starched white shirt. The polished shoes. The way he held his fork, the way he cut his fish into equal pieces, the way he chewed slowly and set down his utensils between bites.

He believed a man should reflect the world he hoped to live in.

The world he hoped to live in no longer existed. He reflected it anyway.

"Let them have their joy," Aishe said, looking at the figs. "It's the only thing that hasn't been subjected to rationing."

Isa pushed back from his plate. "I can't eat another bite."

"Give them to Gia." Aishe nodded toward her daughter-in-law and winked. "Maybe she'll grow you some baby bellies to fill."

Gia's face flushed. The color rose from her neck to her ears and stayed there. She had been a Myshketa for only three months. The wedding had been small, held in the garden, with white hydrangeas cut from the hillside and a priest who kept glancing over his shoulder. She was still learning the rhythms of the house. When to speak. When to stay silent. Where to put her hands when she wasn't working.

Her hands were rarely still. She cleared plates before they were empty. She refilled glasses before they were dry. She folded napkins into smaller and smaller squares until Aishe reached over and covered her fingers with her own.

"Rest, child. The house isn't going anywhere."

Aishe watched her. She watched Isa the same way. She watched them the way she watched the windows at night, the way she listened for footsteps on the path, the way she counted heads at every meal as if someone might vanish between the salad and the fish.

She had buried three children of her own. Three infants who never reached their first year. Three small graves in the cemetery on the hill, three names carved into stone that she visited every Sunday with fresh flowers and silence. The doctors never explained why.

One of Hysen's brother's sons loved spending time at the villa. He came for a day and stayed for a week. He came for a week and stayed for a month. He followed Aishe through the kitchen, helped Hysen carry his legal briefs, fell asleep on the sofa waiting for someone to tell him to go home. No one ever did. Eventually he stopped leaving. Eventually he stopped calling it a visit. With his parents' blessing, Hysen and Aishe adopted him. Aishe fed him from her own hands. She sang him to sleep in the same room where her own babies had stopped breathing. She raised him as fiercely as if he had come from her own body, and more fiercely still because he hadn't.

Isa's brows lifted when he looked at Gia. His face betrayed every thought. Those brows, thick and dark, rose when he was happy, furrowed when he was worried, drew together when he was trying to hide something and failing.

Right now they were soft. He was looking at his wife. He still couldn't believe she had married him.

Hysen watched his family. The Adriatic stretched beyond the terrace windows, silver-blue in the afternoon light. The gardens bloomed with heavy grapes and figs bursting on the branch. Cicadas buzzed in the olive trees. A fishing boat crawled across the horizon, its sail a white triangle against the blue.

The war had not yet crossed the garden wall.

But it was never far.

"I'll take some figs with me," Hysen said. "Something sweet to keep at the office."

He had a speech to prepare. Parliament was scheduled to reopen in three days. The occupation government had selected Hysen, one of the last founding members still alive, to deliver the opening

address. He had written fourteen drafts. None of them said what he wanted to say. What he wanted to say would get him killed.

"Are you sure you want to speak?" Isa's voice was low.

"I have spoken through monarchy, through exile, through prison. I'll speak through this."

"The situation is different now."

"The situation is always different." Hysen selected a fig. Turned it in his fingers. Examined the split where the flesh showed red. "The principle is always the same. If we let fear silence us, we've already lost."

Isa opened his mouth.

A shout from outside cut him off.

The sound cracked through the afternoon like a stone through glass.

Gia's hands stopped moving. Aishe reached for the faucet and twisted it shut, though the faucet was already off. The only sound was the drip of water from the spout. Drip. Drip. Drip.

In Durrës, a raised voice could mean anything. Children fighting over a ball. A vendor calling his prices. Or boots on cobblestone, a name shouted before a gunshot.

Aishe moved to the window. Her spine stayed straight. Her steps stayed measured. She had learned long ago not to run toward sounds. Running attracted attention.

She squinted into the light.

"It's only Rik," she said. She exhaled. "Still. He scared me half to death."

She turned to Hysen.

"Go see what's wrong. I'll make coffee. He shouldn't be shouting like that in the open."

A raised voice could invite suspicion. Suspicion could invite questions. Questions could invite men in uniforms to your door. Even family had to be careful. Even in your own courtyard.

"Mami, make it two," Isa said. "I'll have one as well."

"Coffee for everyone." Aishe waved him toward the door. "But find out what that boy wants before he wakes the whole hillside."

Gia reached for the coffee tin. She measured grounds into the *xhezve*, the small copper pot with the long handle that had belonged to Aishe's mother. She stirred without looking. The motion was automatic. Centuries of women had made coffee this way, in this same pot, with this same circular stirring.

She added a dash of raki. Clear. Strong. It was still afternoon, but no one questioned it.

Hysen and Isa stepped onto the stone path. The breeze carried salt and iron. The olive trees shivered, their leaves showing silver, then green, then silver again.

Rik stood in the courtyard. Bent at the waist. Hands on his knees. His chest heaved. He was twenty years old, Hysen's nephew, with the thick Myshketa brows and the stubborn jaw that every man in the family inherited whether he wanted it or not.

But his eyes were wrong. They moved too fast. They couldn't settle.

Hysen reached him first. He pressed three quick kisses to Rik's cheeks. The greeting that meant family, that meant he could speak freely.

"Bir i dajës. What is it? You shouted like the world was ending."

Rik held out a folded paper. His hand trembled. His knuckles were white around the edges.

"It's from Shyqyri," he said. "The general's brother."

The air changed. Isa felt it in his chest, a tightening that started behind his ribs and spread outward.

Shyqyri Peza's brother commanded the Communist guerrilla units in the hills around Durrës. A warning from Shyqyri meant the danger had left the hills and entered the city.

"Come inside," Isa said. He put his hand on Rik's shoulder. "Coffee is ready."

"No." Rik glanced behind him. His voice dropped. "Better we talk here."

Hysen took the letter. Unfolded it with the same care he gave legal documents. His eyes moved across the page once. His face gave nothing away.

Isa reached for the paper. The words blurred, then sharpened.

> *Honorable Hysen. The guerrilla unit in Durrës wants to kill you. My brother, Myslym Peza, leads these units. He did not give the order, but I beg you. Do not leave your home for a few days until I can resolve this matter.*

Isa read it again. The words did not change.

"They're planning to kill you."

Hysen refolded the letter along its creases. Slow. Careful. As if the folding mattered.

"Father, stay home." Isa heard his own voice crack. "I'll manage the practice. I'll send apologies to Parliament. Just stay inside."

He raked his hand through his hair. The neat part fell forward.

Hysen looked at Rik. Then at Isa. Then at the house behind them, where Aishe stood at the window, watching.

"I have done nothing wrong," he said. "Why should I cower?"

"Because they will kill you."

Hysen placed his hand on his son's shoulder. His palm was warm. His grip was firm.

"Isa," he said. "Better to live one day as a rooster than a life as a chicken."

He turned and walked toward the house. The smell of coffee drifted through the open door.

The next morning, Hysen dressed in his white shirt and dark suit.

He polished his shoes himself, working the cloth in small circles until the leather shone. He checked his reflection in the mirror. Adjusted his collar. Ran his hand over his scalp.

Isa waited in the hallway.

"I'm coming with you."

"You have work."

"The work can wait."

"It cannot." Hysen turned. Morning light fell through the window, catching the dust suspended between them. "We have clients. A practice to maintain. Whatever happens to me, the work continues. That's what matters."

He kissed Isa on both cheeks. Then once more on the forehead, the way he had done since the day he first held his brother's infant son and promised to raise him.

"Tell your mother I'll be home for lunch."

He opened the door. Stepped through. The door closed behind him.

Isa stood in the hallway, staring at the space where his father had been.

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The shouts came late in the morning.

"Blood-sucking bey!"

"Death to the capitalist!"

Isa heard them from inside his father's office. Two gunshots followed. Sharp. Close together.

He was through the door before the echoes died.

Sunlight blinded him. He ran toward the sound, feet pounding cobblestones, lungs burning. The air tasted of dust and metal.

A crowd had gathered on the boulevard. People stood frozen. Their mouths hung open. A woman pressed both hands against her face. A child screamed somewhere behind.

Isa pushed through. Shoulders. Backs. Elbows. He shoved forward. Someone grabbed his arm; he tore free. The smell of sweat and fear closed around him.

The crowd thinned at the center.

A man lay on the gray stone. White shirt. Dark suit. The white had turned red. The red was spreading, filling the cracks between the cobblestones, creeping outward like fingers reaching for something they couldn't find.

Bare scalp. Arms flung out. Eyes open to the sky.

Isa's legs stopped. His lungs stopped. The world tilted and kept tilting.

Then his legs carried him forward.

He dropped to his knees. The blood soaked through his trousers, warm and thick. He gathered Hysen into his arms. His father's head lolled against his chest. The back of the skull was wet. Soft. One bullet had entered and exited near the eye. The second had shattered the jaw. Bone showed through flesh.

"Babi." His voice broke. "Stay with me."

Hysen's chest rose. Fell. Rose again. Shallow. Ragged.

More shots cracked behind. German voices barked commands.

"Geht alle sofort!" *(Everyone go immediately!)*

A military truck screeched to a halt. Soldiers poured into the street. The assassins scattered like smoke.

Isa hoisted his father onto his shoulder and ran.

The hospital was six blocks away. The distance stretched and warped. Buildings leaned inward. The sky pressed down. Hysen's blood soaked through Isa's shirt, warm against his skin, then cooling, then cold.

He burst through the hospital doors. White coats surrounded him. Hands reached. Voices asked questions he couldn't hear.

Someone took his father from his arms.

Someone guided him to a chair.

Someone pressed a cloth against his hands. He looked down. They were red. Completely red. His father's blood had pooled in the lines of his palms, settling into the creases, staining the whorls of his fingerprints.

He stared at his hands for a very long time.

They moved Hysen to Tirana that night.

The national hospital had better doctors. Also more danger. But the wounds were too severe for Durrës. One bullet had destroyed his eye. The other had shattered his jaw so badly he would never speak again.

The headlines came the next morning.

> *An Assassination Attempt Against the Patriot, Attorney Hysen Myshketa.*
> *Yesterday, three unknown boys seriously injured Mr. Hysen Myshketa, a lawyer in Durrës, on the boulevard as he was going home for lunch. We regret to announce that the wound he sustained is serious, and he is currently undergoing treatment at a hospital in Tirana. This event has caused deep anger among the people.*

A government guard was stationed outside his door. Isa didn't trust him. Aishe or Rik stayed in the room at all times.

That first night, Isa stepped into the corridor. He needed air. He needed to think.

A man leaned against the wall at the end of the hallway, lighting a cigarette. Unshaven. Blue shirt. Black jacket. He looked up when Isa passed. Their eyes met.

The man didn't nod. Didn't speak. Just watched.

Halfway down the stairwell, Isa stopped. Something cold moved through his chest. He turned back.

The man had shifted. He was watching Hysen's door now. The overhead light flickered. In the unsteady glow, Isa saw the gleam of a revolver tucked at his waist.

Isa returned to the room. Closed the door. Sat in the chair beside his father's bed.

He did not leave again.

Four days after the shooting, Hysen opened his eye.

The other was gone. His jaw was wired shut. He could not speak.

Aishe dismissed the nurses. "Show me once," she said. "Then leave us."

She learned to clean the wounds. Change the bandages. Mix the medicines. She spoke to him in a low voice while she worked. She told him about the garden. The weather. The figs ripening on the branch. She told him the children had left another bowl on the doorstep. This time with a note. Just two words, misspelled: *Get beter*.

She had buried three infants. She had taken in a nephew and raised him as her son. She had followed her husband into exile and back.

Her hands did not shake.

Gia described these days to me with the kind of detail that only someone who had been present and paying close attention could provide. She remembered the flowers. She remembered the oatmeal. She remembered the way Aishe's hands did not shake.

The hospital room smelled of iodine and old sheets and dying flowers. Gia replaced them every morning. She walked to the market at dawn, before the soldiers changed shifts. She bought warm byrek from a woman with flour on her apron. Bought grapes from a man who kept his eyes on the ground. Bought white hydrangeas from an old woman who sat on an overturned crate, her cart smelling of earth and green stems and something sweet beginning to rot.

She carried everything back through streets that watched her. Past checkpoints where soldiers examined papers. Up four flights of stairs that grew steeper each day.

She arranged the hydrangeas in a chipped jar beside the bed. The petals were browning at the edges. She placed the freshest ones facing outward.

Aishe touched a petal.

"My wedding flowers," she said. "Do you remember?"

Hysen's eye moved toward her. It blinked. Once. Slowly.

The nurse arrived with breakfast. Milk and oatmeal. Gray paste in a white bowl.

She set the tray beside Aishe and stepped back.

Aishe dipped a spoon into the oatmeal. Frowned.

"Could you bring sugar? Honey? If this is all he can have, it should taste like something."

The nurse returned with sugar and honey. Aishe stirred them into the oatmeal until the gray turned gold. She helped Hysen sit. Gia slipped a towel beneath his chin.

"I'll do it," Hysen rasped. The words came out broken through the wires. Barely words at all. But they were his.

He reached for the spoon. His hand trembled. Aishe steadied it. She guided it to his lips. Each bite took effort. Sweat beaded on his forehead. But he finished. He drank the milk. Every drop.

He lay back. Closed his eye. Slept.

Aishe and Gia gathered their things.

"One hour," Aishe told Isa. "We'll be back in one hour. Don't let anyone in."

The door closed. The room fell silent.

Isa sat beside his father's bed. He watched the chest rise and fall. He counted the breaths. One. Two. Three.

An hour passed. Two. Three.

The light moved across the walls. The shadows lengthened.

"Babi."

Silence.

"Babi." Louder.

Nothing.

Isa touched his father's shoulder. Shook gently.

The chest was still. The eye was open, staring at nothing.

He pressed two fingers to his father's wrist. The pulse fluttered. Once. Twice.

Then nothing.

He stumbled to the door. Yanked it open.

"Nurse!"

The corridor was empty. The guard was gone.

At the far end of the hallway, the man in the blue shirt leaned against the wall.

Their eyes met.

The man smiled.

He pushed off the wall and walked toward the exit. His footsteps echoed. Unhurried.

Isa watched him go.

By the time the doctors came, there was nothing left to save.

***

My grandmother Gia told me the story when I was twelve.

We were walking along the seaside promenade in Durrës. The waves rolled in, slow and gray. The wind smelled of salt and diesel from the fishing boats.

That morning, I saw the photograph for the first time. Black and white, hanging on the living room wall. A man I didn't recognize. Bare scalp. Sharp eyes.

Every home in Albania had a portrait of Enver Hoxha on the wall. Every home except ours. My family had refused to hang the dictator's face. The empty spot was its own kind of statement. A silence that spoke.

But Hoxha was dead now. The regime was crumbling. And someone in our family had finally climbed a ladder and filled that space with a different face.

"Who is that?" I asked.

She stopped walking. Looked at the photograph for a long moment.

"Your great-grandfather. Our Hysen."

I looked closer. The frame was new. The glass was clean. But the photograph itself was creased down the middle, soft at the edges, worn in the way things get worn when they've been folded and hidden and moved from place to place for forty-five years.

"Where was it before?" I asked.

She didn't answer. She just kept looking at his face, as if she was still getting used to seeing him out in the open.

*

Beneath the Silence

The Names a Regime Tried to Erase

By Dr. Elida Dakoli

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Dr. Elida Dakoli is a concert pianist, author, and civic leader based in Dallas, Texas. Born in Durres, Albania, she is the founder of DIMA, the DFW Institute of Musical Advancement, serving more than five hundred students annually. She serves on the National Advisory Board and Board of Trustees of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, and was named Ambassador of the City of Durres, Albania in 2023. She is represented for speaking by GDA Speakers.

Beneath the Silence: The Names a Regime Tried to Erase is her memoir.

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